Why Are Tramps?

By H. ADDINGTON BRUCE

THE panic of 1907 brought loss and sorrow to many a home. As happens in all panics, it caused family as well as business tragedies. In the case of one man of my acquaintance it had a peculiarly disastrous effect. Married, and having several children, the stern necessity was forced on him of beginning business life anew. He could easily have obtained work at a fair salary with any one of a number of firms formerly his competitors; but he was too "independent" to take a subordinate position, and could not reconcile himself to the cut in income this involved.

Realizing that the kind of business with which he was familiar might have to go through a prolonged period of depression, and impatient to be well-to-do again, he allowed himself to indulge in the perilous pastime of "rainbow-chasing." Instead of looking for work, he began to look into "propositions" that promised quick returns.

Presently his means became quite exhausted. He had lost his business; now he lost his home. His wife and children went to live with relatives. He himself migrated to another city, declaring that his home town was "dead." Soon he discovered that, for the purpose of getting rich quickly, his new place of residence was no improvement over the old one. So he removed to a third city, and after that to a fourth.

This was the beginning of a wandering life, accompanied by a gradual decline both in ambition and in social standards. To-day it is no longer a question with him of "striking it rich": it is simply a question of gaining a bare existence at a minimum of effort. In fine, this one-time prosperous business man is now a member of the strange brotherhood of tramps, that singular fraternity which is the despair of civic authorities and social reformers.

This Young Man Disliked Labor

AGAIN, in another American city, there lived four young men, of good families and excellent habits. They decided, one summer, to spend a vacation together in taking a walking trip. They were gone from home for perhaps a fortnight, and on their return settled down contentedly to the routine of every-day existence.

That is, three of them did. The fourth within a week unaccountably disappeared. Foul play was suspected, and a persistent search made, all to no purpose. Weeks later he returned as unexpectedly as he had vanished. He said little by way of explanation, except to vouchsafe the information that he had been away on another walking trip. His family, relieved at having him back, troubled him neither with questions nor with rebukes.

In less than a month he was off again. Thenceforward his life was that of an ordinary tramp, except that at irregular intervals he would come home for a few days. He seemed to retain affection for his relatives, but he also seemed to find it impossible to stay home. His wanderings took him all over the United States. He never worked if he could obtain enough by begging to provide him with food and shelter. Yet, so far as his family could discover, he did not acquire any vicious habits. The sole trouble with him was an abnormal restlessness, and a colossal distaste for labor of any sort.

Strange Case of a College Professor

CONSIDER also the curious case of a college professor. As a student he had worked hard, passing his examinations so well that a teaching appointment was readily given him. Shortly afterward he was among the missing. The police were notified; search was made, without result. A month passed. Then his family received a letter from him, written in a remote town. He was ill and penniless. At once a relative went to bring him home. Why did he go? What had he been doing? were among the questions with which he was plied.

He could not, it appeared, give any clear reason for his sudden departure, except to say that he had felt an irresistible impulse to get away from work. He knew well enough, however, what he had been doing. He had been tramping from place to place, sleeping where he could, and depending on the charitably inclined for food. Now he was full of remorse. He was sure that nothing of the sort would ever happen to him again. And he was eager to resume his teaching.

The college authorities took a lenient view of the affair. Things began to go on as before. Then the young professor vanished again. Once more, weeks later, he wrote home for help. Again he had been roaming; but surely he would roam no more. He was mistaken: these were the first of numerous disappearances, during each of which he lived as all tramps live. And, unhappily, the college could not forever condone his conduct. His career was ruined.

How explain these tragedies of existence? How, indeed, explain the tragedy of tramp life in general? What is it that makes a man willing—nay, sometimes eager—to undergo the hardships of life on the road and in the freight-car, to become a veritable social outcast, lacking both a settled habitation and the respect of his fellow men? These are not questions of a merely theoretical interest. They are of great practical importance.

Every civilized country has its tramp problem, and in every country this is a most serious problem. In the United States, at a conservative estimate, there are not fewer than fifty thousand genuine, dyed-in-the-wool tramps. The economic waste entailed by these represents millions of dollars a year. According to one investigator, the annual burden thus imposed on American taxpayers amounts to the colossal sum of ten million dollars. Nor until lately has there seemed to be any way of lightening this burden. Repressive and coercive measures have been enforced generation after generation, and have failed to eliminate the tramp.

Psychology May Solve the Problem

NOW however, a more hopeful era is dawning, with recognition of the complex psychological and physiological conditions on which human conduct depends. The tramp, like the criminal, and like other types whose behavior differs markedly from that of the generality of mankind, has become the subject of scientific study. In especial, the psychologists and physiologists who have been studying him have sought to discover the secret of his passion for wandering and his profound aversion for work. These are the dominant traits of all true tramps, and on each of them science has in the past few years thrown considerable light. Most important of all, it has established that, not penal treatment, but medical and educational care, is what tramps should receive.

Particularly significant are the results of an investigation made by some French scientists as to the physical condition of tramps. A good many years ago Josiah Flynt Willard, who himself became a tramp in order to gain intimate knowledge of their habits and customs, noted as a curious circumstance that tramps find it hard to keep their attention fixed for any length of time. The French scientists have discovered an explanation of this, and it has a vital bearing on the whole tramp problem. Stated briefly, in making a physical examination of a large number of vagabonds, it was found that, no matter how robust and healthy they looked, nearly every one of them suffered from a peculiar nervous debility, characterized by weak heart-beat, low arterial pressure, and sluggish circulation. This meant that the brain was inadequately nourished, and that, being inadequately nourished, it quickly became fatigued if put to energetic use.

Hence the tramp's incapacity to concentrate attention. Hence also his hatred of work, since work of any kind requires some degree of concentration.

His stupendous idleness is thus what scientists would technically call a defense-reaction. It is not mere moral perversity, but rather the instinctive device of a weak organism to husband its feeble resources. On this basis—and undoubtedly the findings of the French scientists are equally applicable in the case of American tramps—the farmer's wife who out of pity gives a good meal to a tramp is acting more wisely than the functionary who compels the tramp to earn his meal by hard labor.

Obviously, however, the wisest course of all would be to put the tramp through a medical routine that would tone up his nervous system, quicken the circulation of his blood, enrich the nourishment of his brain—in a word, make him fit to work. This, I am convinced, is the course that will have to be adopted if the tramp problem is ever to be satisfactorily solved.

But the scientific explanation of the tramp's distaste for work does not, to be sure, explain his tendency to roam. Every city, town, and village has its habitual idlers, constituted like the tramp in point of deficient brain nutrition, but entirely without his wandering impulse. They are content with loafing about the house, club, saloon, or street corner, and are never happier than when left undisturbed in a favorite lounging spot for hours at a time. The tramp, poor fellow, can not be satisfied with idling in any one town, but must press feverishly from place to place. It is as if he were afflicted with a mania for travel, were lashed by an obsessive longing for perpetual change. In a certain proportion of instances there can be no question that the tramp is actually the victim of a mad obsession.

The Double-Personality Explanation

THIS is particularly likely to be the case if he is what may be called a periodic tramp, of the type represented by the professor mentioned above. His roaming is then a symptom of epilepsy or outright insanity, or it may come on as the result of a hysterical explosion in a person naturally of unstable nervous organization, and rendered doubly neurotic by fatigue, illness, emotional shock, etc. In the latter event, as in the former, there is likely to be considerable mental confusion, even to the extent of what psychologists term a doubling of the personality. This was demonstrably the fact with the tramp-professor, who eventually sought a physician's aid in the effort to put a stop to his recurrent excursions into hoboland. To the physician he stated:

"Whenever the desire to go tramping comes over me, I am first made aware of